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DEPARTMENT FOR AF/W AND INR/B
AMEMBASSY YAOUNDE PASS TO AMEMBASSY MALABO

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SUBJECT: LIBERIA - FORMER WARLORD TO RUN FOR PRESIDENCY

REF: (A.) 09 MONROVIA 487; (B.) 09 MONROVIA 532; (C.) 10 MONROVIA 95

CLASSIFIED BY: Linda Thomas-Greenfield, Ambassador, State, AF;
REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

11. (C) SUMMARY. Ex-warlord and Nimba County Senator Prince Johnson discussed his decision to run for the presidency in a January 27 meeting with the Ambassador. His chance of success is slim, but his early entry and the support of his ethnic constituencies could influence the campaigns of stronger candidates. Johnson also criticized the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), claiming to be unfairly 'scapegoated' in the TRC's final report. He welcomed President Sirleaf's call for an analysis of the constitutionality of the recommendations in the final TRC report and stressed his commitment to a peaceful and stable Liberia. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Senator Prince Johnson of Nimba County called on Ambassador on January 27, at his request, to present his views on the accusations levied against him in the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) final report. Johnson also discussed his reasons for deciding to run for Liberia's presidency in 2011 even after President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf announced her candidacy for re-election on the same day (Ref C).

PRINCE JOHNSON, SENATOR AND NOTORIOUS EX-WARLORD...

13. (U) Johnson is a former warlord who led the Independent National Patriotic Front (a breakaway faction of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front) during the first Liberian civil war. He is notorious for supervising the torture and murder of former Liberian President Samuel Doe in September 1990. A widely publicized video shows Johnson swigging a beer while Doe is tormented in the background. Johnson later fled to Nigeria after President Charles Taylor assumed power and did not return to Liberia until after Taylor's 2003 resignation. In 2005, he was elected to the Liberian Senate as an independent candidate, despite an earlier affiliation with President Sirleaf's Unity Party (UP). [NOTE. Johnson fell out with the UP after it pressured him to run for a seat in the House of Representatives. Johnson wanted to run for the Senate and won his seat as an independent. END NOTE.]

...WHO IS LISTED AS A MAJOR HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATOR BY THE TRC

14. (C) Johnson (along with former President Taylor) is one of eight former faction leaders recommended for prosecution for gross human rights violations in the TRC final report. He told Ambassador that accusations levied against him in the report are exaggerations fabricated by unforgiving TRC commissioners who were personally affected by violence during Liberia's civil conflict. Johnson asserted that the TRC's account of the battle leading to Doe's capture is exaggerated. The gunfight was a battle between two combatant forces and Johnson was not the only fighter involved. When Ambassador pointed out that the TRC commissioners were confirmed by Johnson and his Senate colleagues, Johnson sidestepped this fact and claimed that the commissioners were approved when he was away from Monrovia and unable to lodge a protest.

JOHNSON SUPPORTS EXAMINING THE TRC RECOMMENDATIONS'
CONSTITUTIONALITY

¶6. (C) Ambassador asked Johnson for his views on the way forward. Johnson welcomed President Sirleaf's call to amend the law on the Independent National Human Rights Commission (the TRC's successor body) and allow an examination of the constitutionality of the TRC report's recommendations. The TRC, according to Johnson, violated his constitutional right to confront witnesses against him and acted as judge and jury. Thus, he cannot be recommended him for prosecution.

PEACE-LOVING CANDIDATE FOR PRESIDENT...

¶7. (C) Regardless of the TRC situation, Johnson clarified that he is for peace and stability in Liberia, a sea change from soon after the TRC draft report's release when he publicly denounced the document and hinted at the ability to take defensive measures to protect himself (Ref A, B). His commitment to the future of his country, Johnson said, is why he is running for the presidency. He believes that he and his running mate (National Patriotic Party Senator Abel Massalay of Grand Cape Mount County) can garner nationwide support and win because Liberians will question President Sirleaf's integrity after she reneged on a promise to serve only one term during her 2005 election campaign (Ref C). He cited the cheers of welcome that he personally received from supporters, louder than those of Sirleaf, when the two visited his home county as proof of his popularity. Johnson claims to have

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told Sirleaf to move into the role of "senior referee" for a transitional government instead of seeking re-election.

...OF A VETERANS' PARTY?

¶8. (C) Besides his supporters in Nimba County, Johnson likely also hopes to draw support from Liberia's population of ex-combatants, many of whom have expressed disenchantment with the current government. Representative Albert S. Toe of River Gee County told Poloff on January 28 that he and other ex-soldiers have founded the Majority Party of Liberia to appeal to veterans of the Armed Forces of Liberia (AFL). Toe said that Johnson wants to be the party's presidential candidate. However, Toe, a former member of the People's Redemption Council that overthrew President William Tolbert in 1980 does not view Johnson, an ex-civil war combatant, as an actual AFL veteran. He opposes Johnson joining the party.

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Johnson and Massalay enjoy little popular support outside their home constituencies and have no chance of electoral success given their past histories. (Massalay served in Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front and President Taylor's feared Special Anti-terrorism Unit.) Early entry may allow them to gain future political influence by building alliances with Sirleaf or an opposition candidate if they can guarantee the support of their home ethnic constituencies. However, as the security situation improves, Johnson and Massalay's influence may wane. Many Liberians voted ex-warlords into the Legislature believing that these candidates could protect their interests in the tenuous post-war security environment, just as they had done during the conflict. Many legislators have subsequently failed to deliver on promised national support for rural development. Liberians may be inclined to support new representatives in future elections if they believe that the current peace will endure.

THOMAS-GREENFIELD